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September 2014*

Stephen Ward:

A local Revolutionary leader who guided the town's transition
from colonial times to the early republic

A link between the St Pauls' community and the broader narrative of the American Revolution, Stephen Ward is representative of local leaders who contributed to the triumph of independence and provided an important source of continuity between colonial government and the early republic. Ward, who died in 1797, is memorialized through an evocative epitaph chiseled into his marble gravestone in the historic cemetery at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site.

In a testament to political stability and personal leadership appeal, Ward was chosen as Supervisor of the Town of Eastchester in the last four colonial elections (annually from 1772 through 1775), and then again in 1787, 1789, 1790, 1791, 1792 and 1794. While the community experienced the deprivations of the Revolutionary War "neutral ground" and the sharp changes from monarchy to republic, Ward supplied a channel of consistency and familiarity in local administration.

Born in 1730, he matured as one of several children of a prominent family in Eastchester, New York, a small town in Westchester County about 20 miles north of New York City. Stephen was baptized in 1732 in the adjacent settlement of New Rochelle instead of the Eastchester church, an indication of disagreements over religious practices at the time between the Puritan traditions of Ward's parents and the Church of England minister assigned to the town. An English family, the Wards reached the Eastchester community in the late 17th century.

Reflecting a legacy of responsibility, Stephen's father served in the colonial assembly and his older brother Edmund was also active in the public life of the town. The upper circles of New York's public life were dominated by wealthy families with large estates along the Hudson River and merchants from New York City. In that regard, entry into the highest ranks of political influence was beyond Ward's reach. Instead, Stephen emerges as a competent official from a respectable family accustomed to important positions in the town, the kind of person that Eastchester residents would have felt comfortable electing to public office. A successful farmer, landowner and merchant, Ward was active in land speculation and owned at least one enslaved African.

Stephen was 42 in 1772 when he first won election to the post of Supervisor, the equivalent of Mayor. In 1774-5, while the political tremors of the Imperial crisis

agitated public life in Westchester, Ward drew a line for the Patriot cause. The supervisor surfaced as a leader in the local opposition movement because many other important men were reluctant to embrace the challenge to the British. Ward is listed as a delegate to the New York convention of April 1775 which selected the colony's representatives to the Second Continental Congress, assembling in Philadelphia later that month.

A recognizable symbol of the American independence movement in the town, Ward naturally represented Eastchester in the broader councils of the cause. The supervisor was a member of a provisional committee governing New York in 1776 when overwhelming victories by the British troops in Brooklyn and Manhattan forced the Continental army to retreat northward into Westchester County. Stephen informed Continental army officers about the size and location of the half completed stone (St. Paul's) church, which the beleaguered American forces used as a field hospital.

Other positions of trust and responsibility settled on Ward in an increasingly untenable setting of the 'neutral ground,' the term often applied to the southern Westchester area between strong British positions at northern Manhattan and Continental camps across the Croton River. Civilian government was disrupted in a no man's land, leading to large scale evacuation by local citizens. Ward never relinquished the title of Supervisor of Eastchester, but it was

meaningless, since there essentially was no town during those perilous years. But as an extension of his prewar office, he accepted tasks that would have come under the jurisdiction of local government; his stature was enhanced by his selection as a state assemblyman.



The Westchester County 'neutral ground' has inspired many artistic interpretations, including this early 20th century scene.

Among those roles was sequestration officer, a political and military assignment of confiscating and administering property of Loyalists who fled the area. In this capacity, he experienced the gravity of the choices people made in the upheaval of the Revolution. His older brother Edmund sided with George III. When the British invaded lower New York, Loyalists were feared as a dangerous force, leading to Edmund's arrest by a local vigilance committee, which included Stephen.

Stephen Ward also supported military operations in Westchester through an appointive responsibility of commissary, authorized to seize cattle for the American troops, working closely with Continental army officers. As an assemblyman, he shared with other officials the difficulties of governing a state ravaged and severed by the exigencies of

war. There is no clear indication of where Stephen lived during those dangerous years, and he would have transitioned in and out of the neighborhood based on his local and state level obligations. But his wife Ruth (Gedney) and some of their younger children almost certainly joined the evacuation northward. They probably resided in the upper Hudson Valley counties of Dutchess or Ulster, locations of the temporary and shifting state capital, accommodating Stephen's service as an assemblyman.

A recognizable Patriot official, his large home located on the well-traveled Road to White Plains developed into a point of reference. In part, this identification was complimentary, reflecting his reputation. General William Heath used Ward's house as a landmark to locate the position of his Continental troops in a letter to General Washington in January 1777. Alexander Hamilton, a lieutenant colonel and aide de camp to the commander in chief, informed General Horatio Gates in 1778 that "the enemy being out advanced this side of Ward's house, the troops should be put under arms, as a precaution."

Unfortunately, the position of the residence and the owner's prominence in Patriot circles made it a target for retribution. In November 1778, British forces acting under orders of General William Tryon, Royal Governor of New York, destroyed the large, two story house as punishment for American unwillingness to negotiate with the Carlyle Commission, which had been dispatched from England to try to negotiate a settlement with the political leaders of the Revolution. Ward reported the destruction to John Jay, New York's delegate in the Continental Congress. While the correspondence was written with the intent of achieving compensation, it is one of the few wartime documents that allows us to understand the supervisor's perception of the conflict, and is worth quoting at length, capturing the anger of a local official caught in the crossfire:

My dwelling house and other buildings in Westchester County were consumed by fire, by an express order (if not with his own hands) of General Tryon, the inveterate opponent to the rising glory of these States, and whose highest ambition is to spread havoc and desolation in every part thereof, by which burning I sustain no inconsiderable loss. Whether this destruction proceeded from a determination of putting in execution the threats contained in the above manifesto, or whether from a continuation of their usual and wanton destruction, I submit to your judgment. On the aforementioned 13th of November a party from the same body of Troops made an incursion as far as Col Thomas's (in Harrison) where they, in a savage and most cruel manner, put to death Mr. James Brundige of Rye, and one other, after surrendering themselves prisoners.

When the dust had settled, Ward was standing, to the advantage of the town, which gratefully elected him to the post of Supervisor six more times, including four consecutive one year terms. Following the overwhelming challenges of wartime state



Stephen Ward's family occupied the large pew at the right angle of the wall, next to the American flag, in the late 18th century.

government, Ward enjoyed the satisfaction of helping to develop and govern New York in the early republic period through his elected position as a state senator. A selection as a state judge earned the important suffix of **Esq.** after his name. He also held leadership positions on the vestry of St. Paul's Church. His wealth and status are represented by the size and position of his pew in the extant 20th century restoration of the original internal arrangement of the sanctuary. At 42 shillings, his 1787 contribution was the highest in the parish. Ward arranged the naming of the edifice

as St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church in 1795, a necessary, official designation as a corporate parish compared with the informal colonial reference as "the church at Eastchester". According to the 1790 census, he owned three slaves, signaling that he shared the inability of many wealthy New Yorkers to comprehend the discrepancy between supporting the cause of republican government and owing enslaved Africans. He and his wife Ruth, who lived until 1809, rebuilt their home, which remains intact, under the jurisdiction of Concordia College.

A local political leader who experienced first-hand some of the war's most searing political challenges, familial disruptions and military destruction, we can suppose Ward enjoyed the benefits of independence, which he helped to achieve. A final crowning success of his public career was election to the United States House of Representatives in 1796. Stephen's death at age 67 on December 8, 1797, denied him the opportunity to take his seat in Congress. Ward is memorialized through a marble stone, with an inspiring inscription:

Sons of America

Mourn for your country, she has lost a friend
 Who did her rights and liberties defend.
 May rising patriots keep those rights secure,
 And hand them down to latest ages pure.
 Mourn too, ye friends and relatives who knew
 His worth, his kindness, and his love to you.
 But duty bids us all resign, and say,
 Thy will be done who gave and took away.